Remarks at Goddard Space Flight Center
Women's History Month
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I am delighted to be here today to help you celebrate Women's History Month. March also marks the 80th anniversary of Robert Goddard's historic rocket launch, demonstrating the tremendous achievements of all the men and women who work at the Center named for this great pioneer. The theme for this year's National Women's History Month, appropriately for our Agency, is "Women: Builders of Communities and Dreams."

We are very fortunate that outstanding women throughout our agency have helped build communities and dared to dream great dreams, whether they are scientists, engineers, astronauts, administrative staff or safety officials. Women like Dr. Mary Cleave and Dr. Lisa Porter exemplify the kind of achievement I'm talking about. Dr. Cleave is a scientist who excelled at Goddard managing the SeaWifs (Sea-viewing, Wide-Field-of-view-Sensor) program, and she now leads our Science Mission Directorate in managing current and planning future Space, Earth and Sun-Earth connection science missions. Dr. Porter is leading our Aeronautics Mission Directorate and is helping to re-establish NASA's mastery of the core competencies of aeronautics research in subsonic, supersonic, and hypersonic flight.

Here at Goddard, there are a number of outstanding women leaders helping to build communities of high achievers and turning dreams into reality. Just to name a few we are very proud of Dolly Perkins, the Center's Deputy Director for all Technical programs; Associate Center Director Krista Paquin; Barbara Cherry, Associate Director for Communications; Chief Financial Officer Nancy Abell, who I will be working closely with to ensure that Goddard's financial accounts are well managed and that we are able to make strategic investments in future mission activities; Nona Minnifield Cheeks, the Chief of Goddard's Office of Technology Transfer; Sharon Wong, the Special Assistant for Diversity; and Dr. Laurie Leshin, the Director of the Sciences and Exploration Directorate. All these women, along with many others are demonstrating to our younger employees that NASA truly is an agency dedicated to opportunity and achievement.

In preparing for my visit, I was impressed to learn about the story of Dr. Leshin, the NASA Distinguished Public Service medal recipient who's working to decipher the record of water in objects throughout the solar system. Dr. Leshin's research interest has led her to study meteorites from Mars to assess the history of water and the potential for life on the red planet, and to serve as a co-investigator on the Sample Analysis at Mars (SAM) experiment on the Mars Science Laboratory mission, slated for launch in 2009. She also was appointed by President Bush to serve on his Commission on Implementation of United States Space Exploration Policy, providing a strong voice for how science will fit in to the goals of the Vision for Space Exploration.

And when you get into the ranks of Goddard's science and engineering staff you learn about people like Dr. Kim Weaver, an astronomer who discovered the world of high-energy astrophysics while working as a graduate researcher here at Goddard. Dr. Weaver is the deputy project scientist for the Constellation-X mission, part of NASA's Beyond Einstein program. Then there is Haydée Maldonado, who started at Goddard in the Microwave Technology Branch and worked her way up to become Project Manager for the Solar Terrestrial Relations Observatory, or STEREO project. She now is the formulation manager for the Solar Sentinels and Solar Probe missions. There are so many impressive stories of achievement to talk about.

We are also blessed to have at NASA many women who have dared to take their dreams into the space frontier. Today, 30 of NASA's 143 active and management astronauts are women, a truly impressive number considering how far we've come from the agency's fledgling years. If you ever get the chance to talk to one of our female astronauts, I believe you would be amazed at how much they were inspired by an exposure to flight at an early age, and are dedicated to expanding the frontiers of exploration and discovery for the youth of America.

Eileen Collins, who so wonderfully represented NASA and our country as commander of the Shuttle's return-to-flight mission last summer, got the spark that led to her career as a decorated Air Force pilot and astronaut when her parents took her to watch the gliders that rode the thermals nearby the National Soaring Museum where she grew up in Elmira, New York. As a two-time Shuttle commander, Eileen is a tremendous role model and one of the most admired women in America. Today, Eileen is very much in our thoughts and prayers as she mourns the loss of her father James, who lost his life in a tragic accident last week.

I think the larger point I am trying to make is that our nation's space program as a whole is much stronger because of the participation of exceptional women. Today, women make up nearly 20 percent of NASA's scientific and engineering workforce, up from 16 percent ten years ago. And women make up one-third of the entire NASA workforce.

I don't know if you saw our last NASA Update, but a questioner noted the fact that nearly 25 percent of our scientific and engineering work force is eligible for retirement in the next five years and asked Administrator Griffin if we had any concerted efforts to ensure that the new employees coming on board are of a diverse nature. The Administrator responded as follows: "We do have, as you point out, such programs today. A lot of our education programs are oriented toward the front end…because that is when we have the largest leverage in terms of creating a diverse work force." The Administrator added, "When I travel around NASA, I see a work force that looks like a profile of our Nation, and I am certainly going to do everything I can to make sure that it continues to be that way."

I can assure you the Administrator is strongly committed to maintaining and increasing the diversity of NASA as we recruit the workforce we need to implement the Vision for Space Exploration and our other important science and aeronautics programs. I think he put it quite well at last year's 20th anniversary celebration of Women in Aerospace, when he said, "I'm looking for the best people. I'm not that concerned with the package they come in because I'm trying to access their brain."

One of my goals as Deputy Administrator will be to make sure that we continue to have strong education programs that serve the role of helping to expand the pipeline of talented scientists and engineers of all backgrounds coming into the agency. In addition to what we can do at the top of the agency to encourage diversity at NASA, there is so much that can be done at every level to advance this goal. In this regard, I commend the Goddard Women's Advisory Committee for all that it does to serve as a focal point for the concerns of women employees at Goddard.

The other day, Lynn Cline, the Deputy Associate Administrator for Space Operations, told me a story about a female engineer from Goddard and her son. Someone asked the son if he wanted to be an engineer when he grows up. His reply: "No, that's woman's work." We have come a long way.

However, you don't have to be a rocket scientist to recognize that even for all the gains that women have made in technical fields, there still is an imbalance in the number of girls compared to boys who are inspired to pursue careers in math and science and thus expand the talent pool for the next generation of explorers.

We definitely need to work harder to address whatever dynamics exist in our culture that contribute to this imbalance. In that regard, I also want to salute a former Goddard scientist, Dr. Anne Thompson, who was recently honored by Women in Aerospace, a group that I have worked with for a number of years. We honored Dr. Thompson not only because she was a world-class scientist, but also because she made a significant investment of time and energy in mentoring scientists, especially female scientists. Anne was giving back, as is Sally Ride, America's first female astronaut, who formed the Sally Ride Science Club, a group that promotes science festivals throughout the country to help attract elementary and middle school girls to the wonders of science and exploration.

Another good idea, a big one that I subscribe to, is that if we want to inspire the youth of America—girls and boys—to enter scientific fields, we need to engage in exciting work. That's what our space program is all about. Certainly, here at the Center named for America's rocket visionary, there are a number of activities that serve to light the torch of exploration in the hearts of our youth. Whether we are talking about missions such as the Hubble and Spitzer telescopes, the array of Earth Observation System satellites, the upcoming STEREO, Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter, Mars Science Laboratory and James Webb telescope missions and potential Hubble servicing mission, Goddard is a key hub for daring science that draws the interest and admiration of the young and the young at heart.

Today, we are charting a course that will allow the United States to lead in 21st century space exploration, scientific discovery, and research. And in doing so, we are committed to recruiting talented young men and women to carry the torch of exploration and science ever outward. The Goddard Space Flight Center is and will continue to be a major contributor to our progress in space research and robotic exploration.

In closing, I thank you for your wonderful hospitality today, and I appreciate your interest in celebrating the achievements of NASA's outstanding women. Thank you for the warm welcome.